

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee Public Lands and Forests
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee National Parks
United States Senate
Concerning
S. 931 – Federal Lands Recreational Visitor Protection Act of 2003
June 8, 2004

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee to present the views of the administration on S. 931, Federal Lands Recreational Visitor Protection Act of 2003, a bill to establish a program to reduce the risks from and mitigate the effects of avalanches on recreational users of and other visitors to public lands. The USDA Forest Service supports the concepts contained in this bill. However, we cannot support S. 931 unless amended to (1) delete the formation of a grants program and (2) designate the Secretary of Agriculture as the lead for this bill. At a time when we are trying to reduce backlogs and maintain National Forest System lands, we cannot afford to take on the new funding responsibilities under this grants program.

S. 931 describes several goals that would be favorable to the public. These include improved program coordination and development to reduce the risk of avalanche to visitors of public lands, the creation of an advisory committee to assist in development and implementation of an avalanche protection program, and the establishment of a central depository for ordnance used for avalanche control purposes. We support a coordinated and improved avalanche protection program on public lands.

Visitors to public lands that are threatened by avalanches fall roughly into three categories: people driving on mountain highways; people visiting developed sites like ski areas; and people going into the backcountry to cross country ski or ride a snowmobile. Much of the backcountry and developed winter recreation that takes place in avalanche terrain occurs on National Forests. Over the past 50 years, the vast majority of avalanche fatalities have occurred on National Forest System lands.

The Forest Service plays an important role in avalanche coordination and safety, and the expertise that the agency can bring to developing an avalanche program as envisioned in

this legislation is significant. The Forest Service, working with the National Park Service, has a long history of addressing avalanche protection on all federal land. The Forest Service began permitting ski areas on the National Forests in the 1930's and soon recognized that avalanches threatened skiers' safety both traveling to and within permitted ski areas. To reduce the threat, the Forest Service established the Snow Ranger Program in 1938 to provide Forest Service winter sports personnel with rigorous snow science expertise, avalanche forecasting, and training in the use of explosives for avalanche control. Since the 1950's, the Forest Service has played a significant role in furthering research on avalanches.

To further public safety, the Forest Service established the National Avalanche Center in the early 1990s. The National Avalanche Center manages the military artillery program for avalanche control, coordinates a network of backcountry avalanche education and advisory centers, transfers state of the art avalanche technology to the advisory centers, facilitates avalanche research, and develops and distributes avalanche safety products. There are 17 avalanche backcountry centers located in various locations in Alaska; Washington, California, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and New Hampshire. The Forest Service manages 16 of the centers and the State of Colorado manages one. Many of these centers operate through volunteer efforts and donations. The Forest Service typically provides about 50% of the operating funds for each of their centers and community "friends" organizations, and other agencies typically provide the other 50%.

In light of these past and ongoing efforts that the Forest Service has contributed towards avalanche awareness and protection, we recommend that the bill designate the Secretary of Agriculture to lead the establishment of a coordinated avalanche program in cooperation with the Secretary of the Interior. In addition, we recommend that the formation of a new grants program under section 3(e) be deleted from the bill. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior must focus existing funding on effectively managing Federal lands, including avalanche awareness and protection. Creating a new responsibility to fund grants could divert available funds away from these operational needs.

S. 931 establishes a Central Depository for ordnance that is used for avalanche control. A Central Depository is important because all of the military artillery assets appropriate for avalanche control could be stored in a single location and could be better managed including assuring optimal climatic storage conditions. At the same time, we must be aware of the need to look for alternatives to military ordnance. It is estimated that there is a 10 to 15 year supply of usable assets remaining in the United States. The technology exists to develop a system that could replace and outperform military artillery.

We appreciate the efforts that the committee is extending to reduce the risk of avalanche hazards to the public. Thank you, for the opportunity to share our views on S. 931. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.